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DESCRIPTION OF THE NEWLY ESTABLISHED PROVINCE
OF HAUT CHHLONG IN CAMBODIA

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FOREWORD

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DESCRIPTION OF THE NEWLY ESTABLISHED PROVINCE
OF HAUT CHHLONG IN CAMBODIA

[The following is the translation of an unsigned article in Realités Cambodgiennes (Cambodian News), Phnom Penh, 1 July 1960, pp. 1, 6, 6, & 7.]

On numerous occasions Prince Norodom Sihanouk has emphasized the economic and strategic importance of the upper regions of the provinces Kratie and Stung Treng.

As early as 29 February 1956, His Royal Highness announced before the National Assembly that the Government intended to put up for consideration a Plan for Reclamation and a Plan of Administrative Reforms. The carrying-out of this program ought to result in the creation of the province of Rattanakiri (where reclamation is already in progress) and more recently in the creation of the province of Haut-Chhlong.

The Problems to be Faced

For the technicians who know Haut-Chhlong, three problems must be solved in this region: 1) Human: the integration of the Khmers Loeu mountain people into the Khmer community; 2) Economic: the reclamation of the land and the exploration of the forests; 3) Strategic: the guarding of this historic invasion route.

The Problem of our Semi-nomad Compatriots

There are only about 10,000 inhabitants scattered over a territory as large as Belgium, living in most instances a life of the forest and making little contact with the outside world.

Scarcely 30 years ago a part of the Mnong people lived in a permanent state of semi-revolt, refusing to pay taxes and opposing any form of foreign penetration. Even today a faded sign rises amid the brush at the entrance to the Richaume way, warning the traveler: "Attention, you are entering the domain of the Phnongs!" This implies the common understanding that "the Administration refuses all re-

sponsibility for anything which may happen to you here"!

But from 1955 this heroic epoch is no more than a remembrance. The imaginative tourist can have a retrospective shiver before these men three-quarters nude and with an upright and proud look about them; however the sword and the spear have only a ritual and decorative value to them. The Haut Chhlong has entirely succumbed to the modern world.

From 1955, the mountain people have been integrated into the Khmer community. The elephant hunter of the Srepok has the same rights and duties as the Khmer peasant of Battambang or Prey Veng.

The Mnongs, undoubtedly the first occupants of the region, played an important role in the history of the Khmer Kingdom; these men of the Marches (i.e., a military frontier region. Tr.) most often took part as allies of the Khmers in campaigns against the Kingdom of Champa. The figures of Phnongs on the bas reliefs of Bayon remain as lasting evidence of this. In the recent past "diplomatic" relations have existed between the Khmer rulers and certain tribal chieftans even beyond the actual border of Vietnam. Thus it is that the King of Fira (Sdech Phleung) remains in high esteem with the Khmers of today. These relations have ceased only with the French protectorate.

Westerners have often written that the Khmer meaning of the word "phnong" would be "savage" (or sometimes even slave). This is rather far from the truth. This name is merely the Khmer pronunciation of the word "bu nong" which is what the Phnongs call themselves. In any case there is not the pejorative nuance which was believed to have been found there.

Two Phnong groups inhabit the Haut-Chhlong, the Biets and the Bu Nor. Among all the Phnong groups living in Vietnamese territory, they are the most active and the most enterprising and constitute a pole of attraction as far as Ban Me Thuot and even Pleiku. Several hundred Stiengs inhabit the southern part of the province.

We are devoting ourselves to the current problems of malnutrition, sanitary conditions and cultural penetration.

Malnutrition

The majority of the groups of mountain people lives on "rays" /areas cleared by firing the land and using the ash as fertiliser. Tr./ or tillage on "hr-llis." The use of this type of cultivation is no longer carried on; the most perfect illustration of this soil depletion can be found in the completely sterile desert of the laterite

lands in the region of the Camp Le Rolland.

In the dense forest the use of the "ray" can for several years give a sufficient yield (about two tons per hectare) which will assure a supply of rice for the entire year. However in the villages of the clear forest where the soil is poor the possibilities of using "rays" are very mediocre and limited. This type of cultivation causes the semi-nomadism of the villages where entire populations of the town must undertake a search periodically for new arable lands.

Frequently there are shortages of food for several months of the year. However one cannot speak of famine, for the gathering of wild vegetables (of which there are several dozen varieties), hunting or more exactly the gathering of every type of animal judged edible, furnish a supplementary diet which is completely staple.

However several villages on the banks of the Srepok, Prek Tioba and Prek Te rivers, cultivate flooded rice-fields and get a satisfactory yield. But this type of cultivation is only used when the Khmer influence is strong and when the mountain people can see for themselves the fine harvests from the rice-fields; this means in mixed villages.

In these villages the surplus is "exported" to the southern mountain villages where it is used as a means of exchange (elephants, buffaloes, hides, etc.).

Two or three villages near the Vietnamese frontier specialize in capturing and training wild elephants. Generally this important activity assures a sufficient prosperity for the entire community.

The lack of arable lands due to the practice of "ray" and the malnutrition which results is the chief cause of the constant demographic drop of the village populations.

The Economic Importance of Haut Chhlong

In the past the Haut Chhlong remained the haunt of the minorities and the big-game hunters. It was just a white spot on the map. It had not been explored by any scientific expedition, nor had any private business shown any interest in it. It seemed that the laterite hills of the Camp Le Rolland had succeeded in discouraging even the most eager prospectors.

It was only after 1947 that several expeditions from the Geographic Service of Indochina drew up a map of 1/100,000th. But the Haut Chhlong was almost always forgotten. We say almost because the lumberers which are the

last pioneers in the modern age, have thrown themselves into the development of the marvelous forest which borders the Prek Chhlong. Later the works of Pre Ktum and the Palkei were developed in the south.

All the experts are in agreement that the forest has 500,000 hectares, that its total stock is still far from determined and that it is one of the most beautiful in Cambodia. Hence, all the necessary forestry regulations have been strictly applied in the outline of a rational plan for its exploitation and resettlement. It is even possible to hope that in the near future teak plantations will be created. Judging from the experimental nurseries in South Vietnam, these trees acclimate themselves rather easily.

The development of the forests reached its high point because of military needs during the years 1930-1953. A net slowing down in the demand was clearly noticed; the cause for this slowing-down may be classed as follows: 1) the end of exportation to North Vietnam which was the principal buyer; 2) cost prices too high due in large part to transport and man-power difficulties; 3) the development of virgin forests around the new port of Sihanoukville.

It must be noted however that the development of the forests should find new importance due to the commercial treaty between Communist China and Cambodia.

Transport difficulties constituted the greatest handicap to the development of the forests of Haut Chhlong.

The floating of the logs down the Prek Chhlong and then the Mekong to Phnom-Penh is the most economical. But this ideal means of moving the lumber from the regions along the banks of the Prek Chhlong is considerably complicated by the recurrent floods which permit the launching of rafts only during a short period during the year. Moreover these rafts are often made up of lumber which has a density greater than 1, and which requires support of great masses of bamboo. These difficulties have caused most of the lumberers to abandon floating the logs.

Man-power is furnished by the Khmer Islamic villages from the province of Kg-Cham, by the local Khmer villages and occasionally by the mountain people.

Prospects for the Future

500,000 hectares of dense forest; 700,000 hectares of clear forest; 200,000 hectares of savannas.

The greater part of the clear forest is covered by an extremely poor soil, and the savanna conceals a laterite completely sterile cuirass. The possibilities are meagre.

In the regions where the dense forests are at a low altitude (200 meters) near Sre Khum, La Palkei and Prek Chhleng, there is every possibility for industrial crops especially heves /para-rubber plant/. It will be desirable that in the outline of the forest's development to seek the use of the secondary products especially wood oil /huile de bois/ used crude for the caulking of boats or gathered for use in the distillation of rattan. The rattan is recognized as of superior quality, it is made first on the local market and capable of competing with the rattan of Malasia. Bamboo also deserves serious study for its possibilities on the world market.

The regions of fertile lands at a high altitude (nearly 1,000 meters) which border the frontier of Vietnam would be ideal for the raising of coffee, tea and certain plants used in textiles.

In addition to these industrial crops it will be necessary to extend the raising of food crops for local needs, and particularly to plan for putting large sections of the Prek Tioba valley into rice fields and for extending the rice fields along the banks of the Srepsok. Moreover experience proves that the cultivation of truck gardens produces excellent yields around Camp Le Rolland. The possibilities for raising other crops remains as yet unstudied.

The sub-soil of Haut Chhleng is totally unknown. There has never been any prospecting and one cannot make any judgment without any serious studies.

Tourist Attractions

The Haut Chhleng is a superb hunting area where all species of the animals of Indochina can be found including the most rare such as the Krapel or grey ox. An effective system of regulations must be applied for the protection of those species which becoming extinct. A National Park could easily be established in the ideal zone of clear forest around the region of Ba Phlok.

Haut Chhleng: Problems of Reclamation

One must admit that the mountain zones with a small population for all intents and purposes do not participate in the economic life of Cambodia. These zones cover about 1/4 of the territory. A quick review of the reclamation problems in Haut Chhleng can also be useful for other regions where nearly identical conditions prevail such as the backward lands of Stung Treng, la Chaîne de l'Eléphant,

la Chaîne des Cardamomes and a part of Dangrek.

Traditionally man avoids the mountains. Only overpopulation and the harshest conditions of living can force him to seek a livelihood there. We find the most characteristic example in the Island of Java or among the Igorots on the Island of Luzon where it can be said that the populations had colonized the mountains. For until very recently the Vietnamese, the Japanese and even the Chinese had always shown the greatest reluctance to leave the overpopulated plains for the mountain regions.

The reclamation problems for the mountain regions gain more and more the interest of these technicians which are grouped under the vague term of "planners." The enormous growth of human societies in the plains generally and even more along the deltas has forced the search for new areas in the mountains for settlements which will be essential in the future.

Cambodia is far from being over populated, and it may seem strange to think about the development of regions where there are poor health conditions and which are hard to reach. However one can say that today in certain zones (Takeo and Prey Veng especially) the extreme population density has caused a spontaneous emigration, sometimes to other unexplored lands, but most often the people have increased the urban proletariat or the workers on the great rubber plantations. We note in addition that the regions in the plains which are available for reclamation immediately are more limited than has been commonly thought. Moreover we add that even today small land-holding is the rule (it is rare to find a peasant who has more than 2 hectares).

The reclamation of Haut Chhlong is faced with two major problems: 1) the absence of any prospecting or serious study aside from the lumberers (the regular map 1/100,000th covers only a small part of the territory); 2) a lack of man-power due, as has been explained above, to the extreme shortage of people and who have moreover little desire for continual work.

The first need is a geographic inventory of Haut Chhlong. This inventory should be reserved for a team of qualified technicians: first of all agriculturists, lumber experts and particularly soil experts. A preliminary study even rather brief will permit the setting up of a pilot project for agricultural development. This will take into account the possibilities for resettlement, and will make it possible to delimit the zones of primordial interest.

The mapping of these zones on a convenient scale (1/10,000th or 1/12,000th) will be necessary for the drafting of a definitive project. The maps must include these

zones of cultivation, habitat, communication lines, etc., and as well the present day and future possibilities for resettlement.

We come now to the second problem: Where to find the emigrants willing to try this "adventure" in the virgin regions?

This can be done by integrating the 11,000 odd mountain people in the reclamation plan, taking into account their aptitudes and the capabilities for adapting themselves. This will not be done without difficulties, the first of which being to get regular work from these rather independent people.

But above all this can be done by giving all conveniences and facilities to those peasants who have left some of the over-populated regions, to the Khmers of South Vietnam who had to return to the Kingdom, and to demobilized soldiers who are unemployed.